



INVESTIGATES

## Part one: A darker shade of red

Far-right extremism in the U.S. dates back to the Founding Fathers. The present-day version of the far-right has posed a serious threat to the US – and the threat continues. Tennessee is no exception.

BY: **DEVON HEINEN** - 6:01 AM

(Illustration: John Partipilo)



It was dark by the time Michael Miller left the Williamson County Administrative Building on West Main Street in Franklin on Aug. 10, 2021.

“Will not comply!” shouted a throng of angry far-right protesters in the parking lot as Miller stepped into the warm, Middle Tennessee night. “Will not comply!”

*This story is the first entry in a weeklong series.*

Miller, masked and wearing a light-colored button-down shirt and shorts, was leaving a Williamson County Schools special school board meeting about COVID-19 safety protocols. At the time, new daily COVID-19 cases in the state were rising. And the highly transmissible Delta variant had many people – but not everyone – concerned. During the meeting, he had spoken in favor of a mask mandate and additional protocols.

Before the end, the school board voted on a short-term mask mandate for students, staff and visitors at elementary-grade levels in all buses and buildings: Seven voted for the mask mandate, three voted against it.

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A Williamson County Schools board meeting on a mask mandate at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic devolved into chaos, as opponents of masking shouted at school board members and threatened masking supporters in the parking lot after the meeting.

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Within seconds of leaving, protesters started descending on Miller.

“Child abusers!” one man, buff and in a tight-fitting black t-shirt, yelled at Miller. “You are child abusers! There’s a place for you guys! There’s a bad place in hell, and everybody’s taking notes, Buddy!”

Law enforcement helped Miller get to his gray SUV. But Miller wasn’t in the clear. The guy in the black t-shirt met him there.

“We know who you are!” the man shouted as Miller closed his driver door. “We know who you are! No more masks!”

“Keep it calm!” another guy, bald, said to the man in the black t-shirt. The bald guy continued trying to cool off the man in the black t-shirt, claiming that the police officers present were on their side. Then, the two men went after Miller, already inside the SUV.

“We know who you are!” the two yelled, pointing at Miller.

“We know who you are!” the bald man said again, still pointing. “You can leave freely, but we will find you! And we know who you are!”

“You will never be allowed in public again!” the man in the black t-shirt threatened before law enforcement stepped in and started making a path for Miller to drive away.

Over the years, people with far-right ideologies have made their presence known in the United States. They’ve taken warped, twisted stances on things, like race, religion, the federal government. They’ve gotten steamrolled by conspiracy theories and spread them. Lives have been lost. But that hasn’t been all. Members of the far right in the U.S. have tried to reshape things closer to home: the communities they live in. That night in August, Williamson County was in the crosshairs. The attention wasn’t new. Just like it wasn’t for the state overall. None of it would dissipate.



## The evolution of a county

Tennessee has three regions: West, Middle and East. Nashville – the boozy, country music playground that tourists have flocked to for years that doubles as the state’s capital – calls Middle Tennessee home. And just a little south of that is Williamson County. More or less in the middle of Williamson County is the City of Franklin.

Williamson County is suburban. It grew a lot between 2010 and 2020, according to U.S. Census Bureau data, going from 183,182 people to 247,726. Per 2019 data from the Census Bureau, Williamson County is whiter than both Tennessee as a whole and the U.S.: 88.2% of Williamson County is white, compared to 78.4% in Tennessee and 76.3% in the U.S. It’s also more educated than Tennessee and the country in terms of people aged 25 years and older who have at least a high-school degree, the Census Bureau reports from 2016 through 2020.

It was also more affluent than both the state and the U.S. during that same time period. The median household income in 2020 U.S. dollars for Williamson County was \$111,196. Tennessee’s was \$54,833. For the U.S., it was \$64,994.

“Williamson County is a very family-centric community,” 38-year-old Elizabeth Madeira says. “If you ask most people why they moved to Williamson County, most of them would probably say for the public schools.”

Madeira and her husband moved to Franklin in 2008. They and their three kids called Franklin home until the summer of 2022, when they moved to Nashville.

Downtown Franklin is cute in an old, small-town kind of way. Little shops and restaurants line Main Street, the downtown's primary road. Encircled by a roundabout in the heart of historic Downtown Franklin is the grassy Public Square.

There's more to Franklin, though. Vestiges of the slavery era and the country's Civil War can be found here and there. On Franklin's Public Square, a statue honoring Confederate troops stands, as does a newer one, unveiled in October 2021 and dedicated to the U.S. Colored Troops. It honors the formerly enslaved people who fought for the Union.



Williamson County is a very family-centric community. If you ask most people why they moved to Williamson County, most of them would probably say for the public schools.

*– Elizabeth Madeira*

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Tennessee is a red state. The Republican party has controlled the state's legislature and governor's office since 2010, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

In March of 2016, Donald Trump won the state's GOP presidential primary. Come that year's general election, the state went to Trump, and Trump went to the White House.

As the incumbent seeking re-election in 2020, Trump, once again, picked up Tennessee in the presidential election.

Despite its redness, Tennessee has evolved, Madeira, a Democrat, says. She has noticed the state's Republican party has gone further to the right, has gotten more extreme.

### **Far-right ideology claws forward**

In April 2009, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Extremism and Radicalization Branch, Homeland Environment Threat Analysis Division – in coordination with the FBI – prepared an assessment of right-wing extremism in the country. While the assessment noted that Homeland Security didn't have any specific information indicating violence was being planned by domestic right-wing terrorists, the assessment did flag something else: Right-wing extremists might be adding new recruits. How? Fear-mongering.

Far-right ideology in the U.S. has grown over time. Those who plan and potentially carry out physical violence represent one end of the ideological spectrum. The other end is non-violent; however, people on the non-violent end aren't necessarily harmless.



There was this fear that Barack Obama was some kind of communist in disguise or working with the Muslim Brotherhood and was plotting the downfall of American society. And that was really animating to a lot of anti-government sentiment.

*- Jared Holt, Institute for Strategic Dialogue*

Jared Holt is a senior research manager at the international non-profit Institute for Strategic Dialogue. ISD focuses on human rights as well polarization, extremism and disinformation. At ISD, Holt specializes in working on U.S. hate and extremism. He says far-right movements have taken advantage, to at least some extent, of disorder. Two examples are a lack of trust in institutions and fear of what the future might hold.

After Barack Obama became president in 2008, Holt says the far-right militia movement had a little bit of a resurgence. Then, fueled by social media and the ability to sidestep traditional media gatekeepers, like journalists and their news outlets, the early stages of the white-nationalist alt-right started taking shape. Also, says Holt, anti-government sentiment brewed during Obama's two presidential terms. A lot of what caused that festering, Holt thinks, was culture shock from having a Black man as president.

"There was this fear that Barack Obama was some kind of communist in disguise or working with the Muslim Brotherhood and was plotting the downfall of American society," Holt explains. "And that was really animating to a lot of anti-government sentiment."

That anti-government sentiment dissipated around 2015 with the arrival of Donald Trump's presidential campaign, Holt notes. Not ones to typically get excited about a president, far-right extremists saw an opportunity. Sure enough, Trump embraced their rhetoric. So, white nationalists, militias and extreme conspiracy theorists all threw their weight behind Trump.



📷 Elizabeth Madeira (Photo: John Partipilo)

With Trump sitting in the Oval Office, Holt says, far-right ideology “claw[ed] forward” into the forefront. The far-right conspiracy QAnon entered the picture, as did extremist groups, like the Proud Boys. Militias and the “America First” white-nationalist movement did, too. Holt contends Trump moved the Republican party more toward the far-right. Holt adds, though, not every Conservative and Republican espouses far-right ideologies. That said, Holt does feel that far-right ideology has become mainstream in the GOP. Trump wasn’t alone in helping make this happen, Holt points out: one of Fox News’s now-former on-air personalities, in particular, had a role.

“Tucker Carlson is like a king-maker in the Conservative movement,” Holt namechecks Fox News’s now-former, and formerly much-watched, nighttime talk-show host. Carlson repeatedly spewed far-right garbage to his viewers.

In Elizabeth Madeira’s eyes, initially, at the community level, the Tennessee Republican party’s extremist progression was a slow, drip-by-drip thing. But then came Trump, his 2016 presidential campaign, the early years of his presidency. Madeira says they sped the progression up.

Tennessee elected Republican Bill Lee, who’s from Franklin, to be the state’s newest governor in 2018. Madeira says Lee took the baton from Trump and accelerated things even more, which made the state party’s evolution go even quicker.

*Look for part two in our series **A darker shade of red** tomorrow.*



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## DEVON HEINEN

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INVESTIGATES

## Evolution of the Christian right in Tennessee

Middle Tennessee, and Williamson County, in particular, as the buckle of Christian nationalism

BY: **DEVON HEINEN** - 6:00 AM

Rev. Kevin Riggs, pastor of Franklin Community Church. (Photo: John Partipilo)



Part of the far right in the U.S. is the Christian far right. According to Philip Gorski, chair of Yale University's sociology department – political sociology and social movements as well as religion are areas of interest for him – the Christian far right in the U.S. has evolved over hundreds of years. Its basic principles, though, date back to the country's birth, as do its two categories or groups: "God and country" and "God over country."

*This story is the second entry in a weeklong series.*

**Monday:** [A darker shade of red](#)

"'God and country' people believe that America was founded as a Christian nation and that the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence are directly or indirectly inspired by the Christian Bible," Gorski explains. "They believe that America is especially blessed by God, it's been given a special mission in history. And they worry that all these blessings and all that

power will be taken away if it doesn't remain a Christian nation. And, for most of these people, the term 'Christian' kind of implies 'white.'”

“Even further to their right is what I would call the ‘God over country’ people,” Gorski adds. “And these are people who don't believe that America is a Christian nation or that it ever was, but they're determined to make sure that it becomes one, and that usually involves destroying the American government and replacing it with some form of Christian government and Christian law.”

Gorski says the U.S. Christian far right has grown over the last 15 or 20 years. One reason, he says, is that there's been an erosion of authority from older Christian leaders.

“I think there are a lot of conservative white Christians out there who've learned a lot more of their ‘theology’ quote-unquote from Rush Limbaugh” – a former Republican media personality who Trump awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom before dying in 2021 at 70 years old – “and Tucker Carlson, than from Jerry Falwell or Billy Graham.”

The U.S. Christian far right has grown a lot since the start of Obama's presidency, Gorski says, both in terms of numbers and power, but especially in power. When it comes to sheer size, a conservative guess by Gorski puts the percentage of current U.S. Republican voters who are either “God and country” or “God over country” Christian far right at 25 or 30 percent. In terms of power, he says the U.S. Christian far right has grown so much that it's among the loudest voices in the GOP.

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– *Philip Gorski, Yale University*

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Why has the Christian far right grown in the country? Gorski credits social media for being, probably, the biggest reason: social media has let once-small fringe groups interact with each other as well as work on influencing mainstream opinion.

Growth is one thing. Evolution is another. The latter has happened, too, Gorski posits. There's a new development that Gorski mentions: The U.S. Christian far right is becoming authoritarian. He says it wasn't like that 10 or 20 years ago.

Based on the current trends when Gorski was interviewed in 2022 for this story, Gorski thought that the Christian far right would get even more powerful in the Republican party over the next two to four years – so 2024 to 2026. Beyond that window, he said it was harder to predict what will happen. That's because people are variable; what they do will impact what happens.

When it comes to Middle Tennessee, Rev. Kevin Riggs runs down a list of examples showing the region's power in Christianity. It's home to several denominational headquarters. Williamson County houses the majority of the Christian music industry. There are a number of Christian publishing houses in the Middle Tennessee area. And a lot of the executives who work in Christian publishing live in Williamson County.

“Almost anything that gets put out in the quote ‘Christian world’ and ‘Christian culture’ is going to come through Middle Tennessee before it goes out to the world, and a lot of that is going to come through Williamson County,” Riggs says.

Riggs is 57 years old. For the past 33, he has been a pastor at Franklin Community Church. He's currently a senior pastor there. When Riggs talks, you hear a Southern drawl. Originally from Nashville, the fourth-generation ordained minister has lived in Franklin for more than three decades.

There's more on his list. Middle Tennessee has so-called Christian celebrities. And it has organizations that have large preaching circuits. Plus, it has Christian institutions of higher education.



📷 Rev. Kevin Riggs, pastor of Franklin Community Church. (Photo: John Partipilo)

Middle Tennessee’s power, still, doesn’t end there. The Hartford Institute for Religion Research tracks the number of megachurches in the U.S. The institute classifies a church as a megachurch if it has an average weekly attendance of at least 2,000 people. A February 2022 analysis by the *Lookout* for this story of the institute’s data showed Tennessee had 67 megachurches, placing the state fifth in the U.S. But on a per-capita basis, using data from both the institute and the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2020 census population data, Tennessee had the most.

Christianity and politics are big in Williamson County. Riggs says even if you want to be elected for the lowly – and, in Williamson County, make-believe – office of dogcatcher, you need to go church, even if it’s just every so often. And, you need to make sure people know that you go.

One thing Riggs wants to make clear: Not every Christian is far-right. But, he contends, the Christian far right is definitely present.

“You hear the South oftentimes referred to as the ‘buckle of the Bible Belt’ – sometimes that’s Tennessee, sometimes that’s Arkansas – but I’m convinced that Middle Tennessee, and Williamson County, in particular, is the buckle of Christian nationalism,” Riggs says, referring to Christian far-right extremism.

Riggs doesn't know if the non-violent end of the far-right spectrum makes up the majority or the minority in Williamson County's Christian community. It's too close to tell.

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In terms of power in Williamson County, Riggs says calling the Christian far right a “vocal minority” doesn't truly represent how much muscle it actually has. Also, it's become more vocal in recent years.

Extremism hits close to home for Riggs. He used to have Christian far-right views.



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“I know what I’m talking about. I know how Evangelicals think. I know how that far right thinks,” Riggs says. He lets out a chuckle. “You know, I don’t need to read it in a survey. I mean, I know.”

If Trump wins the presidency in 2024, Riggs thinks the situation in Williamson County will get worse. There will be more divisiveness. The Christian far right will be even bolder.

## **U.S. Capitol riot emboldens far-right**

Elizabeth Madeira decided to run for local office in the 2020 election cycle. Before eventually losing her bid for the Tennessee House of Representatives’ 63rd district – a seat held at the time by now-indicted former state House Speaker Glen Casada – Madeira encountered the far right numerous times. The most memorable experience came about six to eight weeks prior to election day. That’s when she got a phone call. The caller had a question: Was Madeira running as a Democrat? Yes, she answered.

“I did not get another word in edgewise because she went on a long ramble about how Democrats support killing babies, pedophilia, support killing police officers – it was a long, very angry tirade, in which she disparaged the college that I attended,” Madeira remembers, before pointing out that her alma mater is a Christian college. “And then she said that her daughter attends that college, and, now, she thinks she might have to take that daughter out of college because she was gonna turn into a Democrat like me.”

A little later in the conversation about that phone call, Madeira adds: “It was basically a litany of QAnon conspiracy theories for at least five minutes, and then she hung up on me.”

On Jan. 6, 2021 – nearly two months after Joe Biden was declared the winner of the 2020 presidential election – an event called the Save America March was scheduled. Trump, just 14 days away from the end of his presidential term, was the headliner.

The day was overcast. Cold, too. People were bundled up; some had draped Trump-themed flags over themselves. Red “Make America Great Again” hats were seen here and there. Same with signs. “SAVE AMERICA” read some. Another: “STAND WITH TRUMP.” One woman held a yellow, handmade sign that read “TRUMP WON” in all-capital letters.

Standing at the lectern, with American flags and the White House behind him, Trump falsely told the crowd the election was being stolen from him. Moments later, he added he would never concede and that “we will stop the steal.”



📷 Riot outside the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. (Photo: Alex Kent)

“Let’s walk down Pennsylvania Avenue,” he instructed later in his speech.

He never went.

A torrent of pro-Trump insurrectionists stormed the Capitol that day. A melee ensued. It lasted for hours. There were countless physical and psychological injuries. People died that day; afterward, too.

More than 725 people had been arrested and charged in connection to the insurrection, U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland announced a day before the insurrection’s one-year anniversary. Ronald Colton McAbee was one of them. McAbee was a Williamson County Sheriff’s Office employee on the day of the insurrection, according to a legal filing obtained by the *Lookout*. McAbee was charged with one count of “Inflicting Bodily Injury on Certain Officers or Employees and Aiding and Abetting”; one count of “Assaulting, Resisting, or Impeding Certain Officers or Employees”; two counts of “Obstruction of Law Enforcement During Civil Disorder”; one count of “Knowingly Entering or Remaining in any Restricted Building or Grounds with a Deadly or Dangerous Weapon”; one count of “Disorderly and Disruptive Conduct in any Restricted Building or Grounds with a Deadly or Dangerous Weapon”; one count of “Engaging in Physical Violence any Restricted Building or Grounds with a Deadly or Dangerous Weapon” and one count of “Violent Entry and Disorderly Conduct on Capitol Grounds,” as laid out in the legal filing.

Also in the legal filing is visual evidence of McAbee wearing a red “Make America Great Again” hat and a black tactical vest during the insurrection. On his tactical vest there was a patch on the left breast that read “SHERIFF” in all-capital letters and a patch with the logo of the far-right militia group the Three Percenters on the right breast.

There were 733 far-right hate groups in the U.S. in 2021, according to the human-rights non-profit organization the Southern Poverty Law Center. That was the smallest annual number of

U.S. hate groups that the SPLC tracked since it recorded 705 in 2002.

In Tennessee, the SPLC tracked 28 hate groups in 2021. These consisted of two anti-LGBTQ groups, three white-nationalist, four neo-Nazi, nine general hate, one antisemitic, four Ku Klux Klan, two anti-Muslim, one Christian identity, one neo-Confederate and one racist skinhead. Eleven of Tennessee's 28 far-right hate groups in 2021 were statewide organizations. Of the remaining 17, six were in Middle Tennessee; none were in Williamson County.

When it comes to individual incidents of extremism or antisemitism, the anti-hate non-governmental and non-profit organization the Anti-Defamation League has data going back to 2002. In 2021, there were 5,373 incidents in the U.S. recorded by the ADL. That came on the heels of 6,978 in 2020 and 4,732 in 2019.



📷 Elizabeth Madeira, who ran for office in Williamson County, Tenn. in 2020. (Photo: John Partipilo)

Tennessee had 38 incidents in 2021, per the ADL. Of the 38, one was a terrorist plot and attack, five were white-supremacist events, 30 were white-supremacist propaganda and eight were antisemitic incidents. Nine of the 38 happened in Middle Tennessee. Two were in Williamson County – both in Franklin: one white-supremacist propaganda, one antisemitic.

Jared Holt of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, thinks the U.S. far right became emboldened in 2021 following the Capitol insurrection. A motivating factor, in Holt's eyes, for the far right is the belief that institutions failed Trump. And helping fuel extremist growth, Holt contends, is right-wing media in the U.S., which has succumbed to conspiratorialism.



To an extent, in Holt's opinion, people with far-right views in the U.S. have always been involved in local politics. One part of the country's far right that comes to his mind is militias: They've tried to get people on city councils or curry favor from local sheriffs.

Now, though, Holt notes, there are people with far-right ideologies that have bought into the conspiracy theory that the 2020 presidential election was stolen and that, on the national level, Republicans aren't fighting hard enough for Trump. These people are trying to step up locally and fill the void that they feel exists.

Madeira says 2021 was crazy in Williamson County. It was divisive. Tense.

That's when she started hearing the term "political refugee" in her community. People who had moved away from more-Democratic states and had come to the more-Republican Tennessee were using it.

Life in Williamson County is a paradox, Madeira says. On one hand, based on her involvement in the community, Madeira thinks that people with far-right ideology are the minority. However, she contends, they're making the most noise and have become a collective, creating controversy and division. On the other hand, Williamson County has been one of the most-vaccinated counties in Tennessee against COVID-19.

At the state level in Tennessee, Madeira feels the far-right has taken over the Republican party, that extremist ideology has become mainstream.

Says Madeira: "I feel like what is happening in Tennessee is dangerous to Tennessee."

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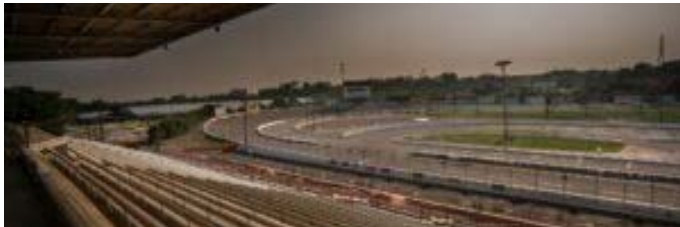


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## INVESTIGATES

## Muzzled: COVID-19 and controversy in Tennessee

In part three of ‘A darker shade of red,’ the rise of anti-masking groups and a physician in the crosshairs

BY: **DEVON HEINEN** - AUGUST 2, 2023 6:30 AM



Dr. Michelle Fiscus was fired from her role as Tennessee’s chief immunization official amid fallout over COVID-19 vaccines. (Photo: John Partipilo)

Around 8, maybe 8:30 a.m. on July 6, 2021, Dr. Michelle Fiscus got to her office at the Tennessee Department of Health. She was running late. Normally, Fiscus would get there around 7 a.m., but that morning, she had a doctor’s appointment.

*This story is the third entry in a weeklong series.*

**Monday:** [A darker shade of red](#)

**Tuesday:** [Evolution of the Christian right in Tennessee](#)

It was her first day back in the office after visiting family out of state over the July 4 holiday. Fiscus's office was typical for a government official in Tennessee. Small. Cozy. No frills.


Waiting on her desk were a plate of scones and a potted orchid – presents and a show of support from her boss. She sat down and started getting ready to dive into work. That's when she spotted a yellow, medium-sized Amazon envelope also on her desk. It didn't have a note. It didn't have a gift receipt. It didn't have a return address.

“To be honest, in my position, you're always a little bit leery of packages that you're not expecting because of the whole anti-vaxxer thing,” Fiscus notes. “I've received books from anti-vaxxers before with hate mail in them.”

Tearing into the package, the now-54-year-old found a black dog muzzle. Basket-style. Made of silicon. Size three, for beagles.

Less than a week later, Fiscus [was fired](#) from her post as Tennessee's chief immunization official.



 The dog muzzle Dr. Michelle Fiscus received in a package at her office in July 2021. (Photo: Dr. Michelle Fiscus)

In May 2021, ahead of Pfizer-BioNTech’s emergency authorization in the U.S. for use of the companies’ joint COVID-19 vaccine on children aged 12 to 17, Fiscus started getting asked by medical providers from around Tennessee about what they were supposed to do if a minor showed up on their own wanting to get vaccinated. Fiscus knew Tennessee had a state “mature minor” doctrine – allowing “healthcare providers to treat certain minors without consent,” citing a 1987 Tennessee legal case – and she went to the state health department’s chief legal counsel to get the doctrine’s legal language. Afterward, Fiscus wrote up a memo to physicians, which, went out May 12 with her name on it.

The memo was run-of-the-mill, just like others she had written during the pandemic about vaccine-related matters. However, this one sparked an uproar on the political right. Fiscus alleges a far-right activist group called Tennessee Stands found out about it.

Around June 21, Fiscus was summoned to her boss’s office, where she was told there was a good chance she was going to be fired because of the memo. Fiscus says she was told that Gov. Bill Lee’s office wasn’t happy that members of the state legislature were upset, that at least one person in the state legislature was applying pressure on Lee and that the governor was applying pressure on the health commissioner to fire her.

Fiscus was fired July 12, 2021, after, she says, she refused to resign.

In a letter to the state’s health commissioner dated just three days prior to the firing, Fiscus’s boss – Dr. Tim Jones – recommended that she get terminated “based on Dr. Fiscus’s failure to maintain good working relationships with members of her team, her lack of effective leadership, her lack of appropriate management and unwillingness to consult with superiors and other internal stakeholders on VPDIP projects.” However, an analysis of a number of Fiscus’s official work-performance evaluations – dating 2016-2017, 2017-2018, 2019-2020 and two interim 2020-2021 evaluations – showed that she was in good standing.

## **Clashes over diversity measures and COVID-19 protections in schools**

She wasn’t the only Fiscus who would encounter the far right. Her husband, Brad, would, too.

Brad Fiscus is 57 years old. He taught biology for 13 years. He also used to coach wrestling and football.

In 2018, Brad Fiscus was elected to the Williamson County School Board. When it comes to politics, he’s middle-of-the-road. The school district had an enrollment of around 41,500 students from a total of 51 schools for the 2021-2022 academic year, according to data from the district.



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The far-right activist group Moms for Liberty – designated as an extremist, anti-government group by the Southern Poverty Law Center – launched in Jan. 2021. Moms for Liberty reported having 165 chapters in 33 states in 2021. It claimed having 70,000 members nationally that year along with 75,000 social-media followers and winning 56 school board seats. Its Williamson County chapter was founded on April 6, 2021.

The chapter hit the ground running. During its first few weeks, members started networking. They connected with individuals tied to Williamson County’s branch of the Republican party as well as Gary Humble, a local conservative activist who has spent weekends serving as a worship leader at Generations Church in Franklin. Moms for Liberty-Williamson County also had meetings with members of Williamson County Schools’ school board.

Meetings with the school board, at least in part, were about keeping Critical Race Theory as well as Diversity, Equity and Inclusion out of the district’s schools.

According to the civil-rights group the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, “Critical Race Theory, or CRT, is an academic and legal framework that denotes that systemic racism is part of American society – from education and housing to employment and healthcare. Critical Race Theory recognizes that racism is more than the result of individual bias and prejudice.”

The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund adds: “[Racism] is embedded in laws, policies and institutions that uphold and reproduce racial inequalities. According to CRT, societal issues like Black Americans’ higher mortality rate, outsized exposure to police violence, the school-to-prison pipeline, denial of affordable housing, and the rates of the death of Black women in childbirth are not unrelated anomalies.”

Brad Fiscus says a CRT-based curriculum was never taught in Williamson County Schools during his time on the school board. And, to his knowledge, no primary public school nor secondary public school in Tennessee taught CRT while he was a member of Williamson County Schools’ school board.

As for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion – or DEI – Brad Fiscus says that wasn’t going to be a curriculum in Williamson County Schools. Instead, it would be something that would hopefully help students feel that they have an equitable as well as equal experience and access to education, that hopefully they would feel safer and in a better position to succeed in the classroom, regardless of things like race, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, gender, sexuality.



Robin Steenman, Moms For Liberty (Photo: Submitted)

Neither CRT nor DEI are bad things. But among the far right, they’re boogeymen. As for Mom’s for Liberty-Williamson County’s chair at the time, Robin Steenman, well, she didn’t even know the difference between the two. She thought DEI was CRT.



It was about 1 a.m. on April 19, 2021, when Steenman started recording. She was doing a Facebook Live video on Moms for Liberty-Williamson County's private Facebook group. Nighttime, after her children were asleep, was when she did a lot of her work for the chapter.

"I look at my little kindergartener, and I think, 'What would I do if I were a fly on the wall when somebody started teaching her this poison?'" Steenman said at one point in the video about DEI, emotionally upset. "And it's a poison that'll kill the soul of a child. It damages them. It tells them that they can't dream big, that the world is not their oyster, that they can't work hard and achieve their dreams, it's – it's limiting and it's poison and it damages their minds, their little hearts."

Originally from Austin, Texas, Steenman lives in Franklin. Previously, she served as an instructor pilot/operational test manager in the Air Force.

"It seems like she thinks that she's not racist, but her behavior speaks racism," Brad Fiscus says. "She believes that she has the ability to – I don't know, say whatever she wants without any kind of rebuttal or any kind of pushback from it."

He wasn't done: "She's gonna push the agenda that's whatever the hot-button agenda is nationally."

The state's Republican governor, Bill Lee, signed legislation into law on May 25, 2021, that banned teaching CRT in Tennessee's public schools. It would go into effect a week later.

Moms for Liberty-Williamson County also would set its sights on Wit and Wisdom, a set of English language arts curriculum for kindergarten through fifth grade.

Steenman met with Tennessee's commissioner of education on June 30, 2021, to complain that Wit and Wisdom allegedly violated the state's new anti-CRT law. Armed with a letter on behalf of Moms for Liberty-Williamson County, she singled out four books in the curriculum for second-graders. One was about former civil-rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

"The classroom books and teacher manuals reveal both explicit and implicit Anti-American, Anti-White, and Anti-Mexican teaching," Steenman alleged in the 11-page letter. "Additionally, it implies to second grade children that people of color continue to be oppressed by an oppressive 'angry, vicious, scary, mean, loud, violent [rude], and [hateful]' white population (Attachment 1 – Teacher's Manual) and teaches that the racial injustice of the 1960s exists today . . . The narrow and slanted obsession on historical mistakes reveals a heavily biased agenda, one that makes children hate their country, each other, and/or themselves."

"Trying to ban books about MLK and Ruby Bridges" – Bridges, at 6 years old in 1960, became one of the first Black children to attend an all-white public school in New Orleans – "in the schools is straight-up racism, without a doubt," Franklin Community Church's Kevin Riggs says. "But they're going to argue with you that it's not. And they're going to rationalize why it's not."

## Evolution of the Christian right in Tennessee



Part of the far right in the U.S. is the Christian far right. According to Philip Gorski, chair of Yale University's sociology department — political sociology and social movements as well as religion are areas of interest for him — the Christian far right in the U.S. has evolved over hundreds of years. Its basic ...

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On Aug. 7, 2021, Steenman posted again in the Facebook group. She bemoaned that one of Williamson County Schools' high schools had sent an online form asking students which pronouns they would like used and that parents had been called “caregivers.” She complained about LGBTQ+ school clubs. She also warned about COVID-19 masks in schools and an upcoming emergency meeting of Williamson County Schools' school board, set for three days later.

The school board meeting lasted nearly three hours. Public comment got crazy: yelling, threats, grandstanding. At least two anti-maskers were kicked out. At the end, the board voted seven to three in favor of a mask mandate – with exceptions, like religious- and health-related reasons – that would go into effect on Aug. 12, 2021, for staff, students and visitors at elementary-grade levels in all buildings and buses. It was set to stay in effect through Sept. 21, 2021.

Within days, Brad Fiscus got two anonymous voicemails. The *Lookout* obtained them. Both were vulgar. Both attacked him and his wife.

One ended: “Eat s—, Brad! Get the f— outta Tennessee, you pile of garbage. F— you.”

By then, the Fiscuses had already discussed moving. They ended up leaving Tennessee the following month.

*Look for part four in our series **A darker shade of red** tomorrow.*



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### DEVON HEINEN

Devon Heinen is a journalist covering U.S. national affairs and specializes in writing long-form features. His reporting on the U.S. Indigenous suicide epidemic as well as on the aftermath of the 2018 mass school shooting in Parkland, Florida, won him national awards in narrative feature writing from the Society for Features Journalism. Devon lives in New York City. You can follow him on Threads (@heinendevon) and on Twitter (@DevonHeinen).

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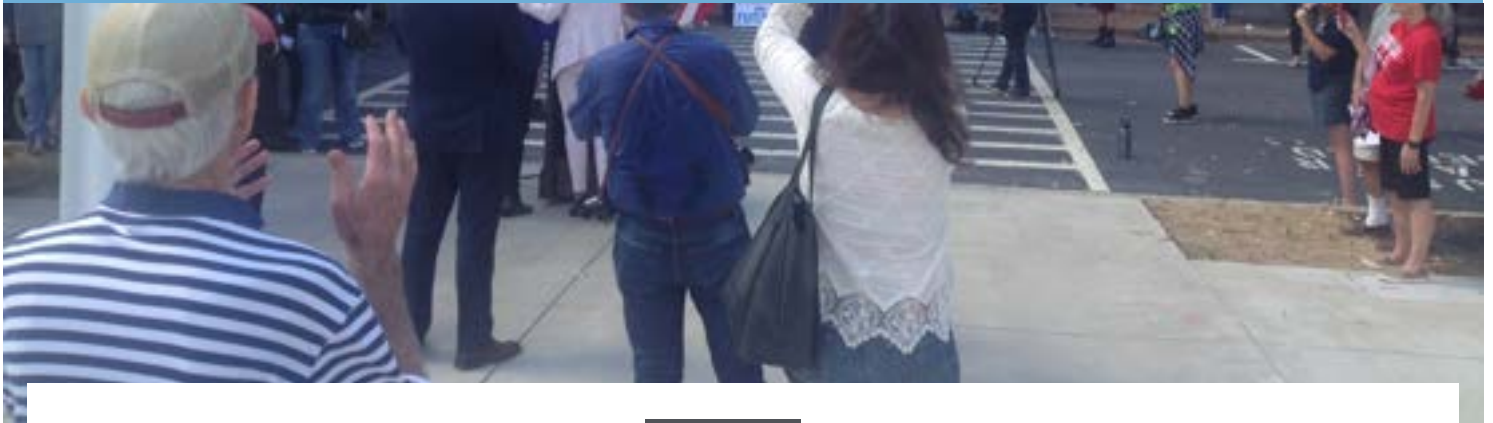
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INVESTIGATES

## “Medical freedom” at the forefront of 2022 Tennessee elections

In part four of “A darker shade of red”: New groups on the far-right of the political spectrum launch out of COVID-19 masking concerns

BY: **DEVON HEINEN** - 6:01 AM

A rally protesting COVID-19 vaccinations outside the Tennessee Capitol in 2021. (Photo: Sam Stockard)



Tennessee Stands – its founder and executive director is Gary Humble – didn’t slow down. It pumped out social-media posts and email newsletter updates. The group tried to shape state legislation; some of its targeted priorities in 2022 included “medical freedom” and so-called “election integrity.” It used a far-right view of Christianity as a driving force for its work.

*This story is the fourth entry in a weeklong series.*

**Monday:** [A darker shade of red](#)

**Tuesday:** [Evolution of the Christian right in Tennessee](#)

**Wednesday:** [COVID-19 and controversy in Tennessee](#)

Williamson County Schools’ school board removed a mask mandate in mid-November 2021. Moms for Liberty-Williamson County, its supporters on Facebook, or both, still had other things on their agenda. Just like early on, Moms for Liberty-Williamson County wanted books

banned. There was a desire to affect curricula. They took issue with things that taught students about the LGBTQ+ community as well as racism and the U.S. Moms for Liberty-Williamson County opposed legislation that would require children in fifth through eighth grade to learn about Black history and Black culture. It also pushed for anti-LGBTQ+ legislation that would let teachers, principals and other public-school employees use inaccurate pronouns when referring to students.

On Jan. 23, 2022, people walked the streets of Franklin, taking part in protests going on that month around the world against coronavirus pandemic-related mitigation efforts. At one point, at least some of the people participating in the Franklin protest stopped to take a group picture. No one was masked in it. Practically everyone was holding a sign; most, if not all, were conspiratorial and anti-science. One man, bald and smiling, stood out. Kneeling in the front row, toward the middle, he held two anti-vaccination signs, each had at least one Nazi-era yellow Star of David badge and the word "Vaccinated" within it.



📷 Gary Humble, founder of Tennessee Stands, at right during a Sept. 16, 2021 rally at the Tennessee Capitol. (Photo: Ray Di Pietro)

## Freedom convoy comes to Tennessee

“WELCOME AMERICAN FREEDOM CONVOY,” a sign read, in all-capital letters.

The sign was hard to miss at the James E. Ward Agricultural & Community Center in Lebanon, Tennessee. Located in Middle Tennessee’s Wilson County, Lebanon is about 30 miles east of Nashville and about 45 to 60 miles northeast of Franklin, depending on which route you drive.

Gates were already open for the American Freedom Convoy’s event there at around 2:30 on that sunny afternoon. Crowds had arrived. Food trucks, too. People were selling t-shirts and flags. And the event’s lineup of speakers and performances were underway.

The American Freedom Convoy was one of a number of cargo-truck-centered convoys in the U.S. that were copycatting the then-recent far-right Canadian truckers convoy, which had protested pandemic-mitigation efforts. In the U.S., far-right truckers from a number of places had already started working their way to the Washington, D.C., area to lawfully protest. They claimed that their freedom had been infringed upon by the federal government. As for the American Freedom Convoy, it specifically set out “[t]o restore our freedoms, our civil liberties, and to bring an end to all unconstitutional mandates with legal provisions in place to ensure this never happens again,” according to a southeastern regional-chapter’s private Facebook group.

The event in Lebanon served multiple purposes. One was to give truckers a place to rest before resuming their trek east. It also let locals show their support for the truckers, by buying them dinner and donating items to them: playing cards, toilet paper, toe warmers.

A third purpose – intentional or not – was to be a far-right pep rally. There were American flags; people dressed in American flag-themed clothing; pro-Trump signs; a sign reading “ARREST Fauci,” referring to Dr. Anthony Fauci, the country’s then-top government health official when it came to infectious diseases; a “FJB LET’S GO BRANDON” flag, with “FJB” meaning “F– JOE BIDEN” and “LET’S GO BRANDON” being the popular anti-Biden saying used by some Trump supporters. One woman wore a dark shirt with “UNMASKED UNMUZZLED UNVACCINATED UNAFRAID” in white lettering.

Turnout at the event was solid. According to a tally by one of the event’s organizers, Sarah Kearney, posted on March 4, 2022, in a private Facebook group called Freedom Convoy Tennessee – which the *Lookout* had direct access to – “thousands” of people showed up. But one key group of event-goers fell short of Kearney’s expectation: actual convoy trucks. While she didn’t provide the number of trucks that showed up, Kearney posted it wasn’t “hundreds.”



## Part one: A darker shade of red

It was dark by the time Michael Miller left the Williamson County Administrative Building on West Main Street in Franklin on Aug. 10, 2021. "Will not comply!" shouted a throng of angry far-right protesters in the parking lot as Miller stepped into the warm, Middle Tennessee night. "Will not comply!" Miller, masked and wearing a ... Continue reading

"How many of you want to continue to fight for your freedom in Tennessee?" Kearney asked in a mid-morning post in the Facebook group on March 5, 2022. "Our rally was just the beginning. We are the majority in this country! Once the rest of the world figures this out we will be unstoppable. We want to do more events, we want to get more information out. Who's in?"

Later that afternoon, Kearney posted again. This time, she had an announcement for the group: She had spoken with Humble from Tennessee Stands – Humble was a featured speaker at the Lebanon event – and he had talked her into helping out with his efforts to affect legislation in the state.

"We ALL need to SHOW UP at The Capitol for this hearing to show our support for medical freedom," Kearney said of an upcoming hearing in Nashville.

The particular piece of far-right legislation that was set to be discussed would, basically, make it illegal if you turned someone away from a place, like a restaurant, if they hadn't been vaccinated against COVID-19 or another communicable disease.

Kearney continued: "Regardless of your age, job, or school, NO ONE should be able to force ANY injections against your will."



The association between Kearney, Humble and Tennessee Stands would continue.

A new convoy happened on April 30, 2022, this one local. People motored from here and there in Tennessee to Nashville. At the time, Tonya Dodd was an administrator of the private Facebook group for the Tennessee chapter of the The People's Convoy; The People's Convoy was another of the multiple far-right U.S. cargo-truck convoys. According to an April 12, 2022, post by Dodd in The People's Convoy Official-Tennessee Facebook group, people from a number of convoys and other groups in Tennessee had banded together. She said the focus going forward would be restoring the U.S. Constitution as well as election/voter integrity and accountability – all far-right conspiracy theories.

## Evolution of the Christian right in Tennessee



Part of the far right in the U.S. is the Christian far right. According to Philip Gorski, chair of Yale University's sociology department — political sociology and social movements as well as religion are areas of interest for him — the Christian far right in the U.S. has evolved over hundreds of years. Its basic ...  
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## Moms for Liberty gets involved in elections

In Tennessee, people within the far right were hard at work trying to get themselves or others elected in the 2022 midterm elections. That way, they could try to put their stamp on things from the inside.

For Robin Steenman, work started before 2022.

In 2021, a self-described conservative, Judeo-Christian political action committee named Williamson Families got launched. The person in charge? Steenman. You see, Moms for Liberty-Williamson County was classified as a 501(c)(4) organization, and – according to the IRS – could only run as a non-profit and was solely limited to operating in a fashion that promoted social welfare. That meant elections were off-limits. Steenman relayed the news on the private Moms for Liberty-Williamson County Facebook group on Oct. 6, 2021. But she noted a loophole: a PAC.

In an email to Williamson Families' listserv – which a *Lookout* writer received directly – a week later, Steenman wrote to supporters, saying that the PAC's purpose was to find, vet and support candidates. After endorsing three candidates running for county alderperson in the local 2021 election, Williamson Families set its sights on 2022.

On March 8, 2022, more than a dozen people publicly got Williamson Families' endorsement at an event in Franklin.

"Psalm 144: Praise be the Lord, my rock who trains my hands for war and my fingers for battle," Steenman said from the lectern on the stage at the event. "The hands of the American people are what will tend the sacred fire of liberty. Williamson Families is not going away. And we will not be cowed. And we will not be afraid. We derive our courage and our calling from God above, and when we win this year, in 2022, all glory to God above." Steenman paused. The crowd clapped. She continued: "Not me."

On April 6, 2022, Williamson Families announced via email an endorsement for someone running in the midterm elections for county juvenile court judge. At that point, the PAC had doled out 20 endorsements. Half of Williamson County Schools' board was on the ballot; those six seats had Williamson Families-approved candidates vying for them.

"It's a 12-member [school] board, and if they get four of those seats, that gives them more of an opportunity to try to swing some other people over. If they get four out of the six seats, then, in two years, they'll have the opportunity to take four or six more," says Brad Fiscus. "If they were to get all six, then all hell will break loose in the school system. I really see it happening because, even though that doesn't give them the majority, it gives them, basically, a six-six tie. Vetoes anything. It kills anything."

## Muzzled: COVID-19 and controversy in Tennessee



Around 8, maybe 8:30 a.m. on July 6, 2021, Dr. Michelle Fiscus got to her office at the Tennessee Department of Health. She was running late. Normally, Fiscus would get there around 7 a.m., but that morning, she had a doctor's appointment. It was her first day back in the office after visiting family out ...

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Of the PAC's remaining 14 endorsements, 13 went to people running for seats on the county commission. The other one went to Connie Reguli in the county juvenile court judge race; however, that endorsement would get rescinded. Why? Turns out, Reguli had been found guilty of breaking the law.

Brad Fiscus wouldn't be surprised if Steenman runs for office herself someday. But, he noted, her running hinged on how her agenda would end up doing at the ballot box in the midterm elections.

A seat representing Williamson County in the state's Senate was also up for grabs in the midterms. One person hoping to win it was none other than Humble.

He was challenging the Senate Majority Leader Jack Johnson. Johnson himself had embraced far-right ideology.

And Gov. Bill Lee, a Franklin-native, was up for reelection. Since first getting elected in 2018, Lee had signed an anti-LGBTQ education bill as well as an anti-transgender health-care bill into law. Those moves are in addition to him banning critical race theory from being taught in public schools.

Former president Donald Trump endorsed Lee for reelection.

Tennessee's two U.S. senators still had time left on their six-year terms. So, their seats weren't available in the midterms. However, all nine of the state's members of the U.S. House of Representatives were. And, yes, candidates with far-right views threw their hats into the ring.

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*Look for the final installment in our series **A darker shade of red** tomorrow.*

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## DEVON HEINEN

Devon Heinen is a journalist covering U.S. national affairs and specializes in writing long-form features. His reporting on the U.S. Indigenous suicide epidemic as well as on the aftermath of the 2018 mass school shooting in Parkland, Florida, won him national awards in narrative feature writing from the Society for Features Journalism. Devon lives in New York City. You can follow him on Threads (@heinendevon) and on Twitter (@DevonHeinen).

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## INVESTIGATES

## In Tennessee, far-right groups flex newfound muscle

“Culture war” language enters local elections and national figures hold rallies for right wing causes

BY: **DEVON HEINEN** - AUGUST 4, 2023 4:40 PM



 U.S. President Joe Biden delivers a primetime speech at Independence National Historical Park Sept. 1, 2022 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. President Biden spoke on “the continued battle for the Soul of the Nation.” (Photo by Alex Wong/Getty Images)

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*This story is the final entry in a weeklong series.*

**Monday:** [A darker shade of red](#)

**Tuesday:** [Evolution of the Christian right in Tennessee](#)

**Wednesday:** [COVID-19 and controversy in Tennessee](#)

**Thursday:** [“Medical freedom” at the forefront of 2022 Tennessee elections](#)

Night had fallen at Independence Hall in Philadelphia. It was Sept. 1, 2022. President Joe Biden was about to deliver a televised national primetime address there regarding the condition of the U.S.’s democracy.

Independence Hall’s bricks were awash in red light, giving the president a red-and-shadow backdrop. A U.S. flag hung over his left shoulder, within camera-shot. A pair of U.S. Marines in dress uniform flanked Biden from a distance. In front of him, a well-dressed crowd listened.

“Too much of what’s happening in our country today is not normal. Donald Trump and the MAGA Republicans represent an extremism that threatens the very foundations of our republic,” Biden declared, before quickly pointing out that not all Republicans are extremists.

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”

They promote authoritarian leaders, and they fan the flames of political violence that are a threat to our personal rights, to the pursuit of justice, to the rule of law, to the very soul of this country.

*– President Joe Biden of supporters of former President Donald Trump*

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“MAGA Republicans do not respect the Constitution,” he said about a minute later. “They do not believe in the rule of law. They do not recognize the will of the people. They refuse to accept the results of a free election. And they’re working right now, as I speak, in state after state to give power to decide elections in America to partisans and cronies, empowering election-deniers to undermine democracy itself. MAGA forces are determined to take this country backwards – backwards to an America where there is no right to choose, no right to privacy, no right to contraception, no right to marry who you love.”

He wasn’t done.

“They promote authoritarian leaders, and they fan the flames of political violence that are a threat to our personal rights, to the pursuit of justice, to the rule of law, to the very soul of this country. They look at the mob that stormed the United States Capitol on January 6 – brutally attacking law enforcement – not as insurrectionists who placed a dagger at the throat of our democracy, but they look at them as patriots. And they see their MAGA failure to stop a peaceful transfer of power after the 2020 election as preparation for the 2022 and 2024 elections.”

The game wasn't over. America hadn't yet lost, Biden assured. But help was needed. He called on Americans to come together and stand for democracy.

Less than 24 hours later, Robin Steenman posted deridingly about the president and his speech in Moms for Liberty-Williamson County's private Facebook group.

“Not sure the evil ones can control their actions much longer,” Charlotte Kelley wrote in a comment on the post. Kelley is a member of the Tennessee Republican party's state executive committee. “Satan is powerful over them.”

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In late August 2022, a The Economist/YouGov poll reported that 62 percent of respondents thought political violence in the U.S. would increase during the next few years, while 43 percent of people believed civil war in the U.S. was very likely or somewhat likely to happen within the next 10 years.

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It's important to remember that far-right extremism in the U.S. exists on a spectrum. On one end it's non-violent. On the other, quite the opposite.

A NPR/Ipsos poll published in Jan. 2022 reported that 64% of Americans who took part in the poll thought the country's democracy was not only in a crisis, but that there was a risk of it failing. That same poll also found that 17% of respondents thought what had transpired at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, wasn't an insurrection. And as for the 2020 presidential election, the poll showed that 35% of respondents didn't accept that Trump had lost.

Later, on June 7, 2022, , the U.S. Department of Homeland Security issued a new periodic [National Terrorism Advisory System Bulletin](#). It detailed how on online forums in which domestic violent extremist and conspiracy theory-related content are posted, the May 24, 2022, mass school shooting in tiny Uvalde, Texas, had been praised. Copycat mass shootings had been encouraged on these forums, per the bulletin. The bulletin also noted that the suspect in the May 14, 2022, mass shooting in Buffalo, New York, said he was motivated by white-nationalist conspiracy theories that are known as “great replacement” or “white genocide.” Also in the bulletin, it was assessed that there would likely be more calls for violence by domestic-violence extremists targeting democratic institutions, political candidates, party



offices, election events and election workers as the U.S.'s 2022 midterm-election season got going.

There's more. In late August 2022, a The Economist/YouGov poll reported that 62 percent of respondents thought political violence in the U.S. would increase during the next few years, while 43 percent of people believed civil war in the U.S. was very likely or somewhat likely to happen within the next 10 years.

And on Oct. 28, 2022 just days before the midterm elections, a far-right extremist broke into the California home of then-U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, though he didn't know Pelosi wasn't there at the time. He attacked her elderly husband and wanted to hold Pelosi herself hostage and potentially break her kneecaps, according to the suspect's interview by the San Francisco Police Department that was detailed in a federal criminal complaint.

The suspect told SFPD that he thought Pelosi was the "leader of the pack" when it came to what the suspect thought were lies told by the Democratic party. Eight days after the attempted kidnapping, on Nov. 5, protestors gathered in Joliet, Illinois; Biden was going to give a speech there that day. Some protestors had flags. Others, signs. One person held a yellow sign with the words "WHERE'S NANCY" handwritten in dark ink and all-capital letters. That question echoed what was said by at least one far-right extremist during the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection and what was said by the suspect in the attempted kidnapping of Pelosi in California.

## **Fear-based, culture-war language in local elections**

A few minutes before 12:45 p.m. on May 11, 2022, a Wednesday, Elizabeth Madeira was behind the wheel of her red 2008 Honda Civic; its air conditioning was struggling to fight the nearly 90-degree heat. The 38-year-old's long, dark hair was up in a messy bun. Gray plastic glasses framed her brown eyes. She was headed to Brentwood, a nearby city in Williamson County, to pick up one of her kids from preschool.

Williamson County had recently held its county primary elections, and was less than three months away from its Aug. 4 general election for county positions. As she continued to drive, Madeira said she had a lot of thoughts about how the county primary elections had played out. However, she was clearly being careful about which she wanted to share.

"To me, it's really disappointing how much some people running for elected office are not aware of the role that a school board member or a county commissioner plays, and, instead, just spews fear-based, culture-war language in their messaging to try to win votes," she said.

In the general election on Aug. 4, Williamson Families – a self-described conservative, Judeo-Christian political action committee – would have five candidates win seats on the 24-seat county commission. Just two Williamson Families-backed candidates won seats on Williamson County Schools' school board.





To me, it's really disappointing how much some people running for elected office are not aware of the role that a school board member or a county commissioner plays, and, instead, just spews fear-based, culture-war language in their messaging to try to win votes.

*– Elizabeth Madeira, former Democratic state House candidate*

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Also on Aug. 4, incumbent Jack Johnson beat Gary Humble in the Republicans' state Senate primary. As for the Republican gubernatorial primary, Lee didn't have anyone run against him. When the general election arrived on Nov. 8, 2022, both Johnson and Lee won.

### **“Liberal tears and exploding heads”**

Less than a week after the Nov. 8 general election, Humble sent an email to subscribers of Tennessee Stands' listserv. Humble had some things on his mind.

The email included a link to an editorial on Tennessee Stands' website that Humble had written. The editorial was riddled with conspiracy theories: about COVID-19, about vote counting, about the war in Ukraine potentially being a money-laundering scheme to help Democrats financially in the 2022 midterms. Humble finished the editorial by saying liberty in Tennessee was at risk from forces nationally and globally; he wrote he was going to try to secure that freedom.

Toward the end of the email, there was another link. It led to a video monologue from Humble on an online video-sharing platform called Rumble. For nearly 23 minutes, he discussed a piece of far-right legislation for the 2023 Tennessee state legislative session that would ban gender-affirming care for minors.

The pro-LGBTQ+ advocacy group Human Rights Campaign defines gender-affirming care as “age-appropriate care that is medically necessary for the wellbeing of many transgender and non-binary people who experience symptoms of gender dysphoria, or distress that results from having one's gender identity not match their sex assigned at birth.”

Tennessee's legislation had just been filed for introduction in both the state's Senate and House a day prior to Humble's Nov. 10 video. Not even three weeks before the legislation's introduction last November, there had been an anti-trans rally at the state capitol held by Matt Walsh – a national figure among the far right.



📷 Sen. Jack Johnson speaking at “The Rally to End Child Mutilation” on Oct. 21, flanked by, left to right, Sen. Ed Jackson, R-Jackson, Sen. Dawn White, R-Murfreesboro and Sen. Janice Bowling, R- Tullahoma.(Photo: John Partipilo)

“If you can imagine with me,” Humble said about the legislation toward the end of his video, “should we get this passed – and I imagine that we will here in Tennessee – the liberal tears and the exploding heads that are going to be happening around this state and around this country will be monumental to watch.”

Tennessee’s legislature went on to pass the legislation. Lee signed it into law on March 2 of this year.

Twenty states, including Tennessee, have passed bans on gender-affirming care for people up to age 18, according to data from June 6 of this year from Human Rights Campaign. At least three have had their bans at least partially overturned in courts, either temporarily or permanently, but appeals to challenge the legal decisions are in the works or expected. Seven other states are considering banning it for people up to age 18, per that same data from Human Rights Campaign

UCLA School of Law’s Williams Institute is a research center that studies sexual orientation and gender identity law as well as public policy. According to a study published in June 2022 by the Williams Institute, there were approximately 300,000 minors between the ages of 14 and 17 in the U.S. that identify as transgender. Using that population estimate, Human Rights Campaign put into perspective its own data from June 6 of this year about the number of states that have passed bans on gender-affirming care for people up to age 18 and the states

that are considering it for people up to 18 years old: 92,700 minors who identify as transgender and are between the ages of 13 and 17 live in states that have passed bans. That's 30.9 percent of the Williams Institute's 300,000-person population estimate. And 39,600 live in states that are considering banning it; that's 13.2 percent. Put it all together: 44.1 percent live in states that have either passed bans or are considering doing so.



📷 Kristen Chapman is moving from Tennessee to Virginia so her 15 year-old transgender daughter can continue receiving gender-affirming care. (Photo by John Partipilo/Tennessee Lookout)

Tennessee's ban was slated to go into effect on July 1 of this year, but then the United States Department of Justice stepped in.

On April 26, the Justice Department filed a complaint in the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Tennessee. The Justice Department alleged that the law violated the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution's Fourteenth Amendment.

With less than 72 hours until the law was set to be enacted, Judge Eli Richardson – a 2018 Trump-appointee to the district's bench – gave the Justice Department and the trans community a momentary win, albeit not a full one. Richardson issued [a preliminary partial injunction](#) as the case plays out in court. The preliminary partial injunction stopped the part of the law that was going to ban health-care providers, establishments and facilities from “prescribing, administering, or dispensing of a drug or device” regarding gender-affirming care, according to the law's bill summary. What the preliminary partial injunction didn't stop? Medical procedures.

That same day, June 28, Tennessee filed an emergency notice of appeal to try to get the preliminary partial injunction overturned. Ten days later, the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals [granted Tennessee's wish](#). Immediately, the full ban went into effect. The Justice Department's case challenging the ban is still being adjudicated.

Regardless of what happens in the court system, at least for now, the far right in the U.S. isn't going away. Neither end of its spectrum is.

The FBI arrested 25-year-old Joshua Hensley from Kansas on June 25, according to a Department of Justice press release. An indictment that would get unsealed and referenced in the press release revealed Hensley was being charged with two counts of “transmitting an interstate threat” regarding a Pride event that was scheduled to take place in Tennessee just before the end of June.



I think the far right has kind of captured enough sentiment in the Conservative base that a lot of politicians and media figures who know better and could do a lot of good by speaking against it and leading a rebuttal against it, I think a lot of them are just kinda scared to go against it.

*– Jared Holt, Institute for Strategic Dialogue*

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The press release said, “According to the indictment, on April 26, 2023, Hensley posted comments to a Facebook post for Nashville Pride and threatened to ‘make shrapnel pressure cooker bombs for this event.’ In another comment posted the same day, Hensley threatened to ‘commit a mass shooting.’”

On the spectrum’s non-violent side, Moms for Liberty’s national body flexed its political muscles in Philadelphia this summer, with its 2023 Joyful Warriors National Summit. The conference was the national body’s second national conference since the group’s founding in 2021. Speakers at this year’s event included the current frontrunners in the 2024 Republican presidential primary: Donald Trump and Florida’s governor, Ron DeSantis.

Robin Steenman, then-chair of Williamson County’s Moms for Liberty chapter, attended this year’s conference. There, during a gala on the third night of the four-day summit, she received one of the national body’s seven annual Founders Awards. Steenman won the Mercy Otis Warren Award, given each year to a Moms for Liberty member “for activating liberty-minded leaders to serve in elected positions” – specifically, “to someone who inspires others through the written word, engaging programing and timely training to take action in the fight for liberty.”

“I think the far right has kind of captured enough sentiment in the Conservative base that a lot of politicians and media figures who know better and could do a lot of good by speaking against it and leading a rebuttal against it, I think a lot of them are just kinda scared to go against it,” says Jared Holt, a senior research manager at the international non-profit Institute for Strategic Dialogue, where he specializes in working on U.S. hate and extremism.

“And we’ve seen politicians who have – like Jeff Flake and Liz Cheney, Mitt Romney – who have gone against it, not even overly aggressively, you know, just saying basic things, like what happened on January 6 was wrong and Trump is responsible for it, they just get cannibalized by their own party.”



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### DEVON HEINEN

Devon Heinen is a journalist covering U.S. national affairs and specializes in writing long-form features. His reporting on the U.S. Indigenous suicide epidemic as well as on the aftermath of the 2018 mass school shooting in Parkland, Florida, won him national awards in narrative feature writing from the Society for Features Journalism. Devon lives in New York City. You can follow him on Threads (@heinendevon) and on Twitter (@DevonHeinen).

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